

Evidence-Based Practice: A Potential Approach for Effective Coaching

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Abstract

As coaching develops as an emerging profession, it is vital for coaches to begin integrating evidence from both coaching-specific research and related disciplines, their own expertise, and an understanding of the uniqueness of each client. Evidence-based practice (EBP) encompasses these three endeavors in designing interventions aimed at positive growth and change for their recipients. While coaching does not have an extensive body of specific knowledge, there is a wealth of evidence from fields such as psychology, adult learning, communication, and others which has a bearing on coaches' knowledge and practice. An EBP approach has the potential to raise the standards of practice and training, increase the credibility of coaching as an intervention, and stretch the individual coach's thinking and practice, if undertaken in its broadest form. However, we suggest there are a number of questions raised by the application of EBP to coaching.

Key words: Evidence-based practice, coaching profession

Introduction - What Is Evidence-Based Practice (EBP)?

In developing an evidence-based approach to coaching, it is helpful to look at how evidence-based practice has developed and been discussed in other related fields. EBP first grew out of the practice of medicine and has since influenced other fields, notably psychology. It has been a discussion with some controversy, much of which goes to the heart of where research and theory relate to practice and where "artful" practice and "scientific" evidence meet. So first, let us lay out a definition from medicine:

Evidence-based practice is "the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients, [which] means integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research (Sackett et al., 1996, p. 71).

In unpacking this definition, there are three main characteristics that bear discussion. First, EBP requires that the practitioner (doctor, psychologist, coach, etc.) use the best available knowledge in his or her field. Second, the EBP practitioner needs to integrate

this knowledge with his or her own expertise. Third, this integration must be accomplished in the context of each client's individual situation. When these three variables are taken into account, interventions will be uniquely customized for each client using a comprehensive and practical framework.

As such, EBP is not following a rigid protocol to avoid 'flying by the seat of your pants'. It requires a (very) thoughtful approach in evaluating what is known about different techniques, what our experience tells us, and what our client specifically needs in order to achieve success. Practitioners using an evidence-based approach must be able to evaluate theory and research for applicability and utility in their coaching, integrate this knowledge with their own expertise in practice, skillfully weave their approach with their client's needs, values and preferences and, finally, assess their intervention's effectiveness for the client and the coaching relationship.

Best available knowledge

In looking at our best available knowledge for evidence, coaching is at a relative disadvantage compared with older professions such as psychology and medicine. At this time, we have very little research specifically evaluating coaching in terms of outcomes, specific techniques, or underlying mechanisms of change in coaching (Stober, 2004; Stober & Parry, 2004; for an annotated bibliography see Grant 2003). Most of our evidence is anecdotal or descriptive. As such, it is a rich source of hypotheses and theory development but does not give us explicit evidence about what "works" in coaching or why it works. However, before there is gnashing of teeth and rending of hair, we should recognize that while coaching as a widespread approach is relatively new, it has roots in a number of fields. Therefore, one of the significant tasks before us is the integration and application of this disparate knowledge base into a coherent body of knowledge that applies to and guides coaching.

For example, most coaches would agree that coaching involves achieving meaningful positive change with clients. There is a large body of research regarding the change process in psychotherapy that can be extrapolated to coaching. The Transtheoretical Model (TTM) is one of the best researched (Prochaska, et al., 1992) and describes a stage model of change that has been demonstrated to describe how individuals move from one behavior to another, more desired behavior. Assessing a client's readiness for change is a prerequisite of effective intervention according to the model. Along these same lines, coaches discuss "coachability," as a prerequisite for changes in their clients; they could benefit from the evidence produced by the TTM research to better understand and promote coachability. We have much work ahead of us in explicitly linking valuable evidence from other disciplines to the development and application of coaching.

What counts as "evidence"?

While most coaches would agree that it is best to have evidence for what we do, the question of "what constitutes evidence?" remains. As has been stated, there is little

empirical research dealing with the effectiveness or mechanisms of coaching. Given the current status of coaching-specific research, at this point in the evolution of coaching as an evidence-based practice, we are mostly left to extrapolate evidence from other disciplines and using the primarily descriptive coaching-specific research to formulate hypotheses and models for further study.

As coaching becomes an intervention subject to increasing scrutiny and research, we have the advantage of learning from the debates within evidence-based movements in other fields. Rather than increasing a division between “researchers” and “practitioners” as has happened in related disciplines (see Stober, 2004 for an argument for a scientist-practitioner model of coaching), coaches can use a broad definition of “evidence” that allows for a variety of research methods.

A number of authors in psychology have eloquently argued against over-valuing nomothetic, controlled quantitative research and ignoring ideographic, qualitative methods (Messer, 2004; Edwards, Dattilio, & Bromley, 2004; Peterson, 1991). Westen, Novotny, & Thompson-Brenner, (2004) question whether tightly controlled clinical trials have enough external validity to apply to general, day-to-day practice. Wampold, Ahn, and Coleman (2001) suggest a medical model of change does not account for outcomes in behavioral change, in this case, through psychotherapy. This is not to say that the randomized clinical trial, the “gold standard” of medical intervention, as a methodology is not useful, but rather to underscore the need to recognise its limits. Systematic case study designs (Edwards, et al., 2004, Messer, 2004), quasi-experimental methods and literature syntheses (McCabe, 2004), and other qualitative methods all have their place in accumulating evidence regarding interventions. Building multiple streams of coaching-specific evidence for practical use, rather than relying on one type of evidence, is one necessary step towards a full evidence-based approach.

The emerging profession of coaching has the opportunity to promote the development of complementary research methods directed at building a more fully integrated base of evidence that will be useful and valid for practitioners. Coaches will still need the requisite skills to recognize strengths and limitations of various research methods and to evaluate the appropriateness of applying research evidence to practice.

A related question an evidence-based practitioner must answer for her or himself is at what level should research evidence apply to practice: general principles of change, models of intervention, or specific techniques? Given that much evidence is extrapolations from other fields at this time, evidence-based coaches would do well to first evaluate the evidence’s applicability to more general structures in coaching and then begin to adapt it for particular techniques.

Practitioner expertise

The expertise needed for applying various types of evidence to practice is just as important as the availability of knowledge. Again, drawing parallels from the related

discipline of psychology (Crits-Christoph, et al., 1991), we can surmise that the individual coach is a factor related to outcomes. Understanding what coaches do in order to be effective in building coaching relationships, engaging in coaching conversations and achieving coaching results is important—as is explicating how they develop this expertise.

One of the challenges of bringing practitioner expertise to bear in the further development of coaching is the reality that coaches have come to this work from numerous backgrounds (notably business and management, psychology and related disciplines, and education and adult learning), with a wide variety of education and training, and only the loosest of agreements on the definitions of the profession and of what it means to be a professional. Most coaches are applying their skills and knowledge from other fields using structures and techniques they learned in coach training organisations. While many of the programmes have a theoretical base, some quite extensive, these training programmes are primarily designed to develop coaches as practitioners. We have yet to develop a thorough grounding for training encompassing theory, research, and practice that is coaching-specific.

The International Coach Federation and other organisations have begun defining required coaching competencies—though they are primarily related to practical experience. Research is still needed, however, to evaluate whether the proposed competencies are actually tied to positive outcomes or not. At least for some of these competencies, there is a body of literature that addresses parallel concepts in psychotherapy. For example, a core competency outlined by ICF involves the ability of the coach to establish trust and intimacy with the client. Psychotherapy outcome research has demonstrated the importance of developing a positive relationship between practitioner and client, termed *the working alliance* (Horvath & Symonds, 1991). These authors define it as encompassing the collaboration between therapist and client and also the capacities of both to negotiate an appropriate contract for the relationship. Drawing a parallel to coaching, what is known about the development of a working alliance in psychotherapy probably has some similar components in coaching.

The goal then is to make the connections between coaching and the related research and evidence in a way that has both scientific integrity and practical utility. “Although some revel in it, the very success of the practitioner strains the discipline. To a degree, wherever a discipline contains both *basic* and *applied* interests there is tension” (Denmark & Krauss, 2005, p.17). If there is no research-driven foundation for the ongoing development of practitioners and the profession, coaches run the risk of exacerbating this tension. While it is beyond the scope of this discussion to link existing research from related fields to coaching competencies and expertise, it is important to note that such data is available and, as an evidence-based philosophy becomes adopted by the coaching community, these links will need to be fully explored.

In addition to possessing specified competencies in coaching, an “expert” coach has other qualities that come into play in an evidence-based approach. Experts have a depth and

breadth of knowledge which can flexibly be applied to individual clients. As discussed earlier, in order to practice at the highest level, experts must apply the best available evidence for each individual client. Doing this fluidly requires high interpersonal skill on the part of the coach. Experts also recognize when the limits of their knowledge and expertise have been reached and do not practice beyond their skill. By “owning” their knowledge and recognizing their limits, expert coaches also engage in self-reflection and continuing education.

Evidence-based practice requires that the individual coach parlay their expertise and available knowledge into an exquisite tool to be used in individual scenarios. Since research evidence often may not fit their unique, individual coaching engagements, the coach must rely on their own expertise and judgment to select and customize the methods employed. This requires, in turn, a deep understanding of the client, bringing us to the third component of EBP.

Client preferences

It is not sufficient to evaluate specific techniques or interventions or to implement expertise regarding relationships without also taking into account the client’s particular nature, situation and goals. Our clients’ worldviews, expectations, and values are all as central to effective coaching as any particular intervention or the relationship between coach and client. What the client brings to the relationship has direct bearing on whether and how coaching will progress.

One of the main issues in taking clients’ contexts into account is the dilemma of trying to devise techniques and build a body of data that can apply to an aggregate of clients and also handle individual differences. Most quantitative research strives for internal validity to allow for rigorous testing and is thus susceptible to limited generalisability beyond the sample studied. Many qualitative methods give rich contextual and individual descriptions but generally do not enable us to explain or predict behavior change. In an evidence-based approach, coach practitioners and those designing coaching research will need to draw on multiple sources of evidence that can be evaluated for use with each unique client. Coaches using EBP need to take into account an array of variables that make up the individual context of each client, including age, developmental and life stages, sociocultural contexts (e.g., gender, culture, socioeconomic status, religious beliefs, etc.), current environmental factors (e.g., career and employment status, networks of communities, levels of stress, etc.), individual and personality factors (e.g., readiness for change, resilience, interpersonal styles, worldviews, self-schemas, etc.), and individual expectations for the coaching. Coaching-specific research is needed regarding who best benefits (and who does not) from coaching and what characteristics they share. Psychological research regarding some of these variables exists and, again, there is a need for linking this body of knowledge with what can be extrapolated to coaching. Overall, being able to use available knowledge with one’s expertise is most effective when matched with the individual client in a particular coaching engagement.

Should EBP be applied to coaching?

This discussion has aimed to describe how an evidence-based approach might be used in the development of coaching. Given that description, a number of questions are raised:

1. Is there enough evidence at this point that can be tied to coaching?
2. Who gets to decide what counts as evidence?
3. What types of evidence should be developed and how should they be weighted?
4. If coaching adopts EBP as a desired model, how can we avoid the overvaluing of one type of research evidence over another?
5. How, and at what level of specificity of application, should research evidence be translated to coaching practice?
6. How would coach training and education have to shift in order to support coaching as an EBP?
7. If EBP is adopted, how do we balance the need for accountability in using evidence-based interventions with further innovation and exploration of potentially effective techniques and methods?
8. Will an adoption of EBP methods be used by other stakeholders (e.g., organisations paying for coaching, regulatory agencies) for an increase in quality and credibility of coaching or to limit choices available for coaches and clients?

Evidence-based practice holds much promise as an approach to increase the credibility and quality of coaching. By learning from the experience of other fields in exploring evidence-based practices, coaching may fashion an integrated, comprehensive approach to the most effective interventions. There remains much discussion beyond this article to help flesh out both the possible benefits and the potential pitfalls of such an approach.

Summary

In describing an evidence-based practice approach to coaching, parallels have been drawn from other fields' experience. Use of the *best available knowledge*, the *practitioner's expertise*, and taking into account *client preferences* are the three primary ingredients that make up the concept of an evidence-based practice. In order to avoid the confounding of EBP with any one type of evidence, it is paramount to stress the importance of multiple streams of evidence in translating science into practice, as no one type of data or methodology can give us a complete picture of what is effective. There is a wealth of evidence across a variety of fields that can be extrapolated to coaching and expanded upon in coaching-specific research.

In addition, identifying and developing the practitioner's expertise in evaluating and applying the best available knowledge is important for the coaching community and for the individual coach working with individual clients. Evaluating known evidence regarding practitioner expertise in other fields will enable us to design research that will confirm, add to, modify, or disconfirm competencies already proposed for coaching. And

finally, the integration of the best evidence with an expert practitioner is useless without taking into account the individual client and their context.

As coaching professionals design methodologies based on these three concepts,

- 1) *Best available knowledge*
- 2) *Practitioner expertise*
- 3) *Client preferences*

we will build an independent body of coaching research, practice, and data that will not only build a body of practical experience that is verifiable as effective coaching, but as a profession, we will stand firm among the other disciplines in the academic canon.

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